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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/SPG

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SUBJECT: UMMA PARTY LEADER PREDICTS NCP "CRASH LANDING" IF
POLICIES DON'T CHANGE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: CDA Fernandez met with Umma Party Chairman Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi January 30 along with Umma party members Balghis Badri and Professor El-Sheikh Mahjoub. Al-Mahdi said the NCP's unpopularity and divided leadership is the basis for its provocative attitude towards the international community and the USG in particular. Al-Mahdi characterized the NCP's provocations as "bluff" and predicted they will cause the party and even the country to "crash land," sooner or later, possibly leading to exploitation by opportunistic Islamic extremists inside Sudan and by Sudan's neighbors. CDA Fernandez told Al-Mahdi that the current U.S. administration has sufficient time to carry out its goals and that ending the violence in Darfur is critical to improving Sudanese-American relations. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) CDA Fernandez noted that the National Congress Party (NCP), lacking the trust of the people and outside world, seems bent on a strategy of increased provocation aimed at many in the international community. He asked about Al-Mahdi's recent discussions with the NCP and President Al-Bashir. Al-Mahdi said they were motivated by concerns for Sudan's future because the current actions of the NCP will lead to a "political crash landing" if they are not corrected. He predicted this would lead to a power vacuum that Sudan's internal enemies (Al-Qa'ida-like radicals) as well as her neighbors might exploit. Al-Mahdi said that the NCP realizes they have no credibility with the people and therefore are scared and looking for a way out. This has prompted the Umma Party's much publicized engagement with the NCP Al-Mahdi expected two to three more weeks of discussion to see if the NCP is at all interested in Umma's help in securing a "soft-landing".

¶3. (SBU) Al-Mahdi said there are four issues that if not properly managed could lead to problems: implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA); implementation of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA); guarantees for basic freedoms; and institution of a new electoral law. Al-Mahdi said the Umma Party is ready to advocate for these objectives but complained that the U.S. had "bilaterally excluded Sudanese civil and cultural society from the discussions" over the past few years, preferring to deal with only two parties (NCP and SPLM).

¶4. (SBU) CDA said that after UNSCR 1769, the NCP could have easily prevented the current predicament and changed the relationship with the international community and the USG by simply implementing the resolution. They continue to obstruct deployment and provoke the international community by a whole range of obstacles, including refusing to permit Thai and Nepalese troops to join UNAMID, and by threatening

to expel the UNAMID Chief of Staff. Al-Mahdi called these provocations a "bluff." He claimed the NCP has told him they have no hope of winning the elections and proposed to him that the NCP and the Umma Party should act together to postpone the elections.

¶ 15. (SBU) Al-Mahdi observed that the NCP is divided and there is no one in charge, not even party leaders such Nafi Ali Nafie and Ali Osman Taha. Al-Mahdi also claimed the NCP uses more than half of all oil revenues to buy off possible army challenges to its authority. He said the NCP leadership miscalculated when it signed the CPA -- though obviously at the time they saw it as the only alternative to a long war. However, the CPA has not delivered the political benefits they imagined, and now they are bound by the CPA and see no way out.

¶ 16. (SBU) Al-Mahdi said that the NCP leadership is not truly independent and claimed they are still partnered with Islamic fundamentalists. He said the fundamentalist ideology prevents the NCP from acting wisely for the benefit of the Sudanese people. He claimed Islamic "terrorists" are working with the NCP to watch the opposition parties as well as others within the NCP. Asked if he saw other signs of Islamic fundamentalism in Sudan, for example in universities or elsewhere, Al-Mahdi claimed that in Sudan it's difficult for Islamic radicalism to take root. "It has been tried but only as an avenue to reject other possibilities."

¶ 17. (SBU) Other Umma Party members present said the NCP is full of false bravado, thinking that the Americans have their hands full elsewhere (Iraq and Kenya). Al-Mahdi said that Iraq is a false analogy. "You do not have to do that here, it wouldn't require much but a failed Sudan would be a nightmare." Al-Mahdi asked CDA if the USG is working with

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the SPLM to pressure the NCP. CDA noted that SPLM is in a trap; they know the smart move is to work with other parties such as the Umma Party, but they remain with the NCP because of the CPA and because of the money that the NCP can provide. Intellectually the SPLM knows better but cannot totally free themselves from this dependence on money.

¶ 18. (SBU) Al-Mahdi said the USG should not only look at Sudanese politics as a North/South problem. "It's only a North problem - this is a totalitarian regime." CDA agreed and said the USG needs to see more of the leaders in the North. However, CDA Fernandez said any discussions need to take into account the priority of solving Darfur because that is what the West (and the U.S.) is most focused on now. The Internally Displaced People (IDPs) are at the heart of the matter. The USG needs to be able to say definitely that "the genocide is over." Without that the US will never be satisfied, nor should it be.

¶ 19. (SBU) Comment: Al-Mahdi sought to portray his recent dealings with the NCP in the most possible positive light but even many in his own party are disturbed by the widely publicized overtures to Umma by President Al-Bashir. His assertion that the NCP is still closely tied to Islamic fundamentalists doesn't track with our observations - the NCP is cynically interested in money and power not ideology. Despite his current marginalized role, Al-Mahdi is the biggest fish (other than the SPLM) with whom the NCP may attempt to ally itself during elections. However Al-Mahdi will play his cards carefully since one of his objectives will be to retain his opposition party credentials and he does not want to be seen as being closely allied with the NCP. He is already paying a political price for this public flirtation.

FERNANDEZ